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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 003627

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: PROMINENT REFORM ADVOCATE DISCUSSES CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT AND POSSIBLE POSTPONEMENT OF CONFERENCE ON U.S.-EGYPT RELATIONS

Classified by Charge Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: Shafik Gabr praised the recent amendment to Egypt's presidential election law but said the GOE had done a poor job of explaining it. He hoped a scheduled May 12 news conference by Gamal Mubarak would clear the air. He was impatient with opposition complaints about the amendment and suggested they should stop grousing and start campaigning. While supportive of international monitors for presidential elections, Gabr expressed fear that President Bush's call for them might backfire. Gabr said that he will travel to Washington next week with Prime Minister Nazif, partly to press for high-level USG participation in his upcoming conference on U.S.-Egypt relations. Gabr said if he leaves Washington without participation commitments from the highest levels of the USG, he will postpone the conference for a second time. End summary.

2. (C) The Charge met May 11 with well-connected Egyptian businessman and prominent political reform advocate Shafik Gabr to discuss the Article 76 amendment altering rules for presidential elections. Gabr was very upbeat about the amendment. He would have preferred that aspiring independent presidential candidates be required to obtain a smaller number of parliamentary signatures to run than currently stipulated, but argued that the amendment was a significant step forward nevertheless.

3. (C) Gabr added that the requirement that any party wishing to put forward a candidate in future presidential elections hold at least five percent of the seats in the People's Assembly (PA) was a reasonable one. The Charge cautioned that the rule could be considered reasonable only if the upcoming parliamentary elections resulted in truly diverse party representation in the PA. If the PA remains wholly dominated by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), the Charge argued, the amendment would be meaningless. Gabr agreed.

4. (C) Gabr complained that the GOE had done a terrible job of explaining the amendment publicly. He noted that the amendment was complex, with different rules for elections this year and for elections in the future. Because there is so much misunderstanding about what the amendment means, Gabr continued, it was easy for opposition parties to condemn it and for other observers to assume the worst. Gabr explained that NDP Policies Committee Chair Gamal Mubarak would hold a press conference May 12 to explain the amendment and try to clear up the confusion.

5. (C) Regarding the opposition parties, Gabr said they "need to stop complaining and start running (candidates)." In response to a question from the Charge, Gabr said that nothing in the amendment would prevent the Tomorrow Party from naming Ayman Nour as its candidate for the upcoming election. Gabr could not say what impact conviction for forgery would have on Nour's eligibility. (Note: Most observers agree that under the current law on political rights a conviction would make Nour ineligible for the presidency. End note.)

6. (C) Gabr was critical of President Bush's recent call for international monitors to observe upcoming elections. Gabr stressed that he agreed with the principle and had been pressing the Egyptian leadership to accept international monitors, but that the President's public call would backfire by prompting hard-liners to dig in their heels. Pressure for international monitoring should be applied, Gabr said, but privately rather than publicly.

7. (C) Gabr noted that he would be accompanying Prime Minister Nazif on his upcoming visit to Washington and New York. He was hopeful that discussion of Egyptian elections would not overshadow Nazif's economic reform accomplishments, but expressed confidence that Nazif could skillfully address any political questions he faced.

8. (C) While in Washington, Gabr plans to seek high-level USG participation in the June 3-5 conference - "Egypt and the United States: Partnership in a Changing World" - sponsored by his think tank, Egypt's International Economic Forum (EIEF). He is frustrated that his efforts in Washington in April did not generate any commitments from senior officials.

He said that he had been leaning toward postponing the conference for a second time, but that his Washington partner in organizing the conference had urged him to hold off until he (Gabr) makes the rounds in Washington one more time. Asked to be precise about the level of participation he would require for the conference to go forward, he replied "Secretary Rice or Deputy Secretary Zoellick."

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GRAY